NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The 1st General Meeting of the Society for 1988 will be held in:

THE CONSERVATION CENTRE, 120 WAKEFIELD STREET, ADELAIDE

ON

MONDAY 28TH MARCH 1988 AT 8.00 PM.

AGENDA

1. Apologies:

2. Minutes of previous General Meeting:
   Minutes of the previous General Meeting, held in the Conservation Centre, 120 Wakefield Street Adelaide on 26th October 1987, having been circulated in this journal, to be confirmed.

3. Papers and Journals:
   Papers and journals received from other societies and organisations, since the last general meeting, will be tabled at this meeting.

4. Speaker:

   Ms. Dean Fergie, Research Fellow, S.A. Museum will address the Society. The subject of her address will be:

   "On the Face of It: The Cultural Construction of Gender in Contemporary Australia."

5. Supper will be served at the close of the meeting.

R. Allison
Hon. Secretary
120 Wakefield Street
ADELAIDE SA 5000

NB.
Please return envelopes to Council members where possible, for reuse.
ORGANISING "DREAMINGS"

Peter Sutton

Adelaide, 1988

A major exhibition of Aboriginal art will open at The Asia Society Galleries in New York in October this year. Its title is DREAMINGS: THE ART OF ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA. It is a joint project of The Asia Society and The South Australian Museum, and it relies on extensive consultations with Aboriginal artists and other Aboriginal community members in thirteen locations across Australia during preparations in 1987. Aboriginal artists and panellists will be brought to New York for the early phase of the exhibition and the public symposium which takes place in November.

The curatorial and catalogue writing team consists of Peter Sutton, who is the exhibition curator and catalogue editor, Christopher Anderson, Philip Jones, Francoise Dussart and Steven Hemming. Apart from Ms Dussart, all are members of staff of the South Australian Museum. Three are anthropologists and two are historians.

This is clearly an unusual opportunity for the work of Aboriginal artists to reach an international audience. During 1989 and 1990 the exhibition will travel to Chicago, Los Angeles, Melbourne and Adelaide. A documentary film based on the exhibition and book, and designed for television release, is currently being proposed by Film Australia.

Over one hundred works will be shown, and the book which accompanies the exhibition (and has the same name) will be a solid study of nearly 300 pages, containing a catalogue but ranging well outside the exhibition and being sold as a trade publication (the US publisher is George Braziller; the Australia/UK publisher is Viking; release due September 1988).

Although this will be the first time many people in the US have seen Aboriginal art, we have resisted the temptation to make it a survey, based on a 'one of everything' or shopping-list approach. We do not represent all regions, all styles, all periods, or even all of the emerging 'stars' of Aboriginal art. So this is not a Who's Who of Aboriginal artists, nor is it simply a distillation of what any particular aesthetic would judge to be the 'best' in visual terms.
KEY IDEAS

The works have instead been selected around a small core of key ideas. These are understandings which we hope illuminate Aboriginal art, which make it more richly readable by non-Aborigines, in particular, and which enable it to be seen in something of its social and historical context. These ideas are contained in the exhibition, but are expounded at greater length in the book.

In the book, we begin with the foundational concept of the Dreaming in the Aboriginal classical tradition, and how this is manifested in so much Aboriginal art. We then look at the obstacles which have stood in the way of a rich visual and intellectual response to Aboriginal art by others. We examine the spiritual, logical and social foundations of the Aboriginal aesthetic, and how this aesthetic contributes to the distinctive look of Aboriginal art in most of its manifestations. As a way of making this more concrete, we look in detail at the construction of images of the body in bark paintings of the Top End, and the compositional patterns of acrylic paintings of the desert. We then move on to a case study of the production of paintings in the Western Desert region of Central Australia, in which relationships between the symbolisms of the paintings and the rich social, political, economic and intellectual fabric of the Warlpiri and related peoples are brought out. We look next at the changing philosophical climates within which the non-Aboriginal world has gradually become aware of Aboriginal culture, and the history of trends and personalities in the collection, study and exhibition of Aboriginal art over the last century. Finally, we discuss contemporary movements in Aboriginal art practice, grappling with the questions of continuity, authenticity, innovation, and appropriation, ending with a look at how the art of Aborigines has influenced that of others.

We have avoided the purely 'ethnological' approach which has so long bound museum-based anthropologists and historians to materialist and functionalist studies of Aboriginal art, and encouraged them to suppress the topic of visual appreciation. We have also tried to avoid the opposite extreme of dwelling almost exclusively on subjective aesthetic responses, one penalty of which is the weight of mystification carried by the private languages in which those responses are so often couched. In fact, this exhibition is incidentally an attack on the received distinction between 'anthropology' and 'art criticism' as a useful division of labour in creating exhibitions and books about art. Art for art's sake is as limiting a framework as art for context's sake, politics' sake or any other simplicity, especially where a relatively unfamiliar culture is concerned.
THE EXHIBITION

The works in the exhibition are in two major forms: painted flat surfaces and painted sculptures. There are no tools, weapons, containers or items of personal adornment. It is predominantly a paintings exhibition.

The three main geographical and cultural regions of Australia are represented: tropical northern Australia, desert Central Australia, and temperate southern Australia. This provides the context for some continent-wide generalisations about Aboriginal art which we hope to get across, and some variety of visual conventions and materials.

Nearly half of the works are contemporary, in the sense that they were made in the 1970s and 1980s, although considerations mainly of space, and partly also of quality, led to the difficult decision not to include urban art on this occasion. We felt it was important to provide a substantial number of similar works rather than a token scatter of many different kinds of works, so that viewers could come to grips with the unfamiliar subjects and approaches being offered. The book, however, accommodates works by urban Aboriginal artists of the 1980s along with those from more remote areas. Among the older works are shields dating from 1855, c1880 and the turn of the century, and bark paintings from the 1870s, 1880s, and then every decade from the 1920s to the present. This reflects the strongly historical approach of the exhibition.

The groupings of the works are as follows:

Bark paintings from the Top End of the NT 37
Acrylic paintings from Central Australia 29
Shields: from Central Australia 5
  from the Lower Murray River 3
  8
Watercolours of Lower Murray culture 1840s 4
Toads and dogs (sculptures), Lake Eyre region 18
Sculptures from Cape York Peninsula 7

TOTAL 103

Just over half the works come from the collection of the South Australian Museum, which has the world’s largest Aboriginal collection and one which is distinguished by historical and scholarly depth and by its strong representation of most of Australia. The other major lenders are the Art Gallery of South Australia, the National Museum of Australia, the Flinders University Art Museum, the Macleay Museum, the Aboriginal Arts Board, and seven private collectors.